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### Abstract

Maria decided that she knew several important things and therefore had no need to go back to school. She could count and do maths well already and the things she knew numbered seven. The first of the things she knew was that she liked sweet things, especially glykon tou spitou. The glass jars lined up in the armarella held every fruit imaginable. Cherries, and walnuts, almond, apricots, eggplants, figs, anthos tou gidromilou, all cooked in sugar and dripping in syrup. Her favourite was made from the rinds of the juiciest oranges in the world. They were served only when they had guests.

# Irini Savvides

## STOLEN SWEETS — 1964

Maria decided that she knew several important things and therefore had no need to go back to school. She could count and do maths well already and the things she knew numbered seven.

The first of the things she knew was that she liked sweet things, especially *glykon tou spitiou*. The glass jars lined up in the *armarolla* held every fruit imaginable. Cherries, and walnuts, almond, apricots, eggplants, figs, *anthos tou gidromilou*, all cooked in sugar and dripping in syrup. Her favourite was made from the rinds of the juiciest oranges in the world. They were served only when they had guests.

She knew also that the *armarolla* was not locked. The jars peeked at her through the mesh wire and tempted her to eat them, but her mother's eyes were often on her and she was not stupid. That was the second thing she knew. She would wait until she heard the click clack of the *woofa*, as her mother was busy weaving cloth, and steal a jar to open, eating only from the middle. That way the jars still looked full and her mother was none the wiser. She was careful not to use the same spoon as if she dipped it from one jar to the next, it would spoil the fruit, and her mother would notice the change of colour and she would be found out.

Maria had heard the church bell ring at 7.00 am to call any sleepy heads out of bed, but she had no such luck. She had been up early to feed the pigs, check the chickens to make sure a fox had not gotten to them in the middle of the night and fight, as usual, with the goat. It was a contest as to who was the most stubborn, and sometimes she won, but not that day. The goat had refused to be milked despite her cajoling, her threats and her chasing it around the carob tree, so finally she had called her mother to help. She was none too pleased.

'This is your job,' her mother insisted as she caught and tethered the goat, and pulled at its teats to bring forth some milk for the *halloumi* she was making that day. 'I have a good mind not to give you any when it is done, honestly! You know I am off to *Kyria Koumi's* to make it together. I do not have time for this nonsense today!'

Maria scowled at the goat and reminded herself to give it a swift kick later when she could make a quick escape; but she realised that her mother's threat was idle. For the third thing she knew was that, despite the fiery temper of her mother and reprimand as she may, her mother adored her. She would be given a juicy piece of freshly made salty *halloumi*, tinged with mint, to test.

If Maria had really been alert she should have guessed then what kind of day it was to be, but she was still half asleep. Already she had cleaned out the pigpen,

swept the eternal dust from the front yard, thankful that her father had concreted some of it and then pulled a few carobs from the vast tree that sat in the backyard. As she went down the stairs, she was naively glad to be getting out of the house for the day.

The fourth thing she knew was that she hated school. The fifth was that Mihali would be waiting for her.

He stood at the corner of the street and she passed him a few carobs as they trudged up the hill, the cobblestones as slippery as always.

‘Shall we go the short way or by the *sshinia*?’ she asked, knowing already what he would answer. The smell of the tiny black and red pods filled the air when they walked past the enormous tree. The only thing bigger in the village was the olive tree. It was old, but not as ancient as the famous fig tree in Famagusta. Another thing she knew was that when her mother baked olive bread in the *fourno* out the back of the yard, that if she used the wood from the *sshinia* the bread and the house smelt heavenly. But this was not important enough to be included in her list, and besides it was something that any fool knew.

Maria and Mihali walked past the old water mill, no longer in use, well not as a mill anyway. Now the mill was a meeting place and a mystery to her; it turned perfectly sensible girls into *trelles*! It was where the older kids sat on a Saturday night around the stone circle and on the wooden platform that closed off the huge void beneath it. Here they flirted with each other as they walked around and around the old stone disks.

On Saturday afternoons some of the girls in the village would walk past her house on their way there, always politely calling out to her mother.

‘*Kalispera Kyria Dimitra*,’ they would say, knowing she would invite them in to collect jasmines. As visitors, they were also always invited to taste the latest *glyko*. They would sip water, kept cool in the clay pots covered with cotton doilies, hand-stitched with pretty coloured beads on the edges that hung over the top, careful not to smudge the lipstick they had saved to buy. They did not put this on until they had left their parents’ houses. There would often be no trace left of it on their return anyway.

The girls would sit in their crisp cotton frocks in their outer yard, with the huge wooden doors open, watching passers-by. Her mother, all honey and sweetness to visitors, would provide a needle and thread for them. The girls sewed strands of jasmine into necklaces to wear when they headed off to walk around the mill arm in arm, smelling divine.

Mihali and Maria sometimes spied on them and she learnt another thing there. When the girls put on a dress that moved in the wind, they walked in a certain way and boys watched them. She had seen the boys stop mid-sentence; hair slicked back and clean for a change, as the girls paraded past in their swishing skirts. She thought if she could learn to sew these types of dresses, she could make her own living, so she would not have to go to school anymore. It would mean she would

have visitors and would have an excuse to offer them *glyko* and cool water. Her door would always be opened and she could see the village go about its evenings on hot summer nights. She knew how she would make her way in the world.

So if she knew six things she was not stupid, except for when she stepped into the school gates. Maria was not sure what happened then, but it was as if all the things she knew stayed at home in the confines of her bedroom, and she went into class with no brain. She knew she should not speak out of turn, she knew it, she told herself over and over. But as she could not always remember it, she could not yet really count it as a thing she knew. Maybe next year.

That morning the leader of the school assembly had called Mihali to lead the daily recital of the *Kini Prosefxi*. Up until then it had been a perfectly usual morning. That moment, as the teacher called upon Mihali to recite the Morning Prayer, she did what she had done the entire year before, when he had been at school. She stepped forward when they called his name and started reciting the prayer automatically.

'*Paraklide tou pnevmatis alitheas...*' She was stopped mid-sentence by the leader, *Kyrios Panos* jeering at her.

'What is your name?' he asked.

'Maria Lazarides,' she replied knowing full well he knew her name. Here everyone knew everyone. 'Daughter of Stephanous and Dimitra,' he had also taught her father, but she had to be polite; besides she did not want him to think she had no place in the village, that she belonged to no one.

'What is his name?' he asked pointing at Mihali, making sure the entire school was enjoying her humiliation.

'Mihali Koumi. His name is Mihali Koumi, son of Georgious and Kattia. I forgot sir, he didn't ... I...' A hand ended her obvious explanation.

'Do you want to insult the Apostole child?' he asked her in a voice full of scorn. 'If he was given back Mihali his voice, who are you to speak for him?'

Maria shook her head in an angry silence. It was not she who was insulting. Mihali gently touched her hand to let her know he could do it. Elitsa and Andri sniggered behind her back, but she didn't care at all. Gedhi looked away.

'You are so stupid,' Elitsa taunted her 'as stupid as your mute friend'.

'You have fat ankles,' she hissed not even looking back, knowing in time she would get her own back. Wait until she was sewing their clothes, she thought! She would make the waists so tight they could not breathe or eat, or worse, too floppy so they would look fat, so the boys they hoped to entice would look elsewhere. These girls would never wear necklaces made out of jasmines from her garden. Besides nothing could make them smell sweet she decided, nothing.

As they stood in lines to go inside the classrooms it was as if something in her shrivelled. Learning to read in her morning class was wonderful, but whenever she had to write down the answers to the dull questions they asked after each passage, she became bored. She would look out the window with such longing,

wishing it was the afternoon class already so she could plant her onions, check on her spinach and pick the sweet rocket she had planted well. Her mother was always delighted when she brought home her produce. It proved her daughter had the patience to nurture something, Dimitra said.

That day when the morning break had come and she had been standing in line to drink the horrid *sisitio* she thought she would be sick. The milk was hot from sitting in the sun and she barely swallowed it. 'I hate drinking this stuff.'

Mihali stood by her and drank his quota. 'At least we aren't hungry,' he said.

'I think I liked it better when you didn't talk,' she half-joked.

As they hung around the back of the line for the *mourouneleo*, a supposed tonic for their bones, bitter horrid smelling syrup, she really did start to feel ill. 'I can't Mihali. I will be sick if they put that revolting spoon with that sticky stuff down my throat today,' she complained.

'I'll go first,' he offered. 'And I will hold your hand when you take it, then we can go and kick the soccer ball around and you can beat me at scoring goals. But I have been practising with Mustafa I warn you,' he said wistfully.

Maria immediately felt horrid for teasing him. 'No to holding my hand, yes to the soccer,' she agreed.

She went up to their teacher, *despinis* Maritsa, thinking that with all the money she must be paid she should really have a far nicer skirt, and opened her mouth.

'I will be sick if I drink that,' she warned the teacher, who paid no attention to her.

Maria breathed in and tried very hard not to smell it. The teacher put the spoon out and down, down, down went the syrup deep into her throat.

It wasn't deliberate, really it wasn't. But when she brought up her breakfast, somehow she managed to get it not only on her own apron, but the teacher's skirt also. She spluttered and choked and ran off before the teacher could admonish her, hearing the shrill yelling in her ears.

'This is my best skirt. It is wool, real wool imported all the way from London!'

Serves you right for buying goods from the traitors, thought Maria, as she headed back home. Her mother would have to pay for the skirt to be cleaned and she would be furious! Well, Maria was going home to change. She would somehow have to find the courage to confess. There was no way the girl would return after lunch, she was done with school for the day.

'I will check on her,' Mihali offered and then ran off quickly to catch her.

Once he had, he kept time with her pace, and thoughtfully nodded his head as they walked back down the hill.

'What are you nodding about?' she asked angry with him and the whole village, no the whole world. Why did adults have to the right to make kids eat and drink things they hated, just because they were little?

‘Because,’ he said quite honestly, ‘even though you speak a lot, you do mean what you say. So I should have known. Anyway, at least we get a few hours off school.’

‘True,’ she said grinning ‘and since my mother is at your mother’s all day, and my father is not coming home for lunch because she is making cheese at your home, we have the whole house to ourselves’. A plan was forming and she was determined to carry it out.

Suddenly they heard the wooden flute tinker its way over the hill and only one of them smiled.

‘Mustafa, my dear friend! What are you doing here?’ Mihali exclaimed and Maria was a little annoyed. Did she always have to share her friend with his friend? Besides Mustafa was older and his will was harder to bend than Mihali’s. Regardless, she knew how she was going to get the taste of that vile syrup out of her mouth.

‘We are going to Maria’s. Come with us,’ invited Mihali and Maria just rolled her eyes and kept walking.

‘What happened to your clothes?’ he asked. He had left his own school in the Turkish section to attend his weekly music lesson. The best music teacher, Ahmed, lived near the Greek school still. He had refused to be enclaved and Mustafa had refused to miss his weekly lessons. It gave him an excuse to escape, despite his mother’s fears.

‘None of your business,’ Maria insisted, ‘and why aren’t you at school? What would your mother say?’

‘She won’t find out. Anyway, I will tell her I was educating you two,’ he laughed and she turned on him.

‘Do you want me to hug you with all the vomit on my dress?’ she asked, and began chasing him down the hill.

‘You smell!’ he teased and soon they were at her door, he making sure he kept well away from her.

Maria opened the vast wooden doors, hearing the familiar squeak of the iron bolt, safe inside at last. It felt strange being home with no adults. It had only happened once before.

In the year prior her parents had gone to church without her, to teach her a lesson. She had been tardy in feeding the chickens and her mother had threatened she would make her stay home and finish the job. Maria had not believed she would make good on her threat, until she had heard the door closing.

As she had sat fuming, feeding the stupid chickens, Maria had decided she would not go without communion and bread. She would have her own. The priest was always saying that *Christoulli* was with them, so she decided she would test the theory.

Standing on the chair she had reached up and pulled the bottle of Commandaria down from the shelf, and sniffed it. It was exactly what the priest gave them; so

she poured a glass about the size of the one he used to give the entire congregation for Communion.

Maria had then pulled the stale bread from the cupboard and broken it into bits and dropped it into the deep red liquid. Then she went out to the sink, washed her hands and went back to her room to put on the white dress that she wore to church, that was hanging ironed on the wardrobe. She put on socks and real leather shoes, ready.

When she had come out to the kitchen, she had taken the glass in her hand, forgetting in all honesty that the priest used a tiny silver spoon to give each person a single mouthful. Feeling lonely though she headed back out to the chickens. It was their fault she was home, so they could at least keep her company. They could be the rest of the congregation she decided, and she sat singing what she could remember of the liturgy and said her name.

*‘I thouli tou Theou Maria, the servant of God Maria,’* she said proud of herself for remembering the right thing to say and then she sipped the glass of sweet port. The heat coming into the chicken pen made her a little sleepy. She was rather thirsty too, so she drank it quickly, chewed the bread and ignored the goat that came nosing around to see what she was eating and later nuzzle her as she slept.

Maria remembered being very sick the next day. She had a habit of bringing up things she could not stomach. Her mother had not scolded her too badly when she had explained what she had been doing, but her father had been kicked out of the house when he had laughed so much his sides ached. The seventh thing she knew was never to expect adults to react as you think they will.

Today nonetheless she decided she would be smarter and not get caught. Besides it was perfectly reasonable to offer food to your guests, indeed it was the biggest insult not to. So she led the boys to the *sala*, the best room and told them to sit.

*‘As you are my guests I will serve you glyko,’* she declared feeling both very grown up and just a little deceitful. *‘Stay there while I change.’*

Mihali sat awkwardly unused to being in the room for guests, as he practically lived here, so he was never invited to sit in the lounge room for visitors.

*‘You had better not, you know your mother will thrash you if she finds out.’* He shifted awkwardly on the chairs, glad that the sticky plastic covering them would hide any signs of his visit. Really he was much happier sitting in the kitchen.

Mustafa, who had never been inside Maria’s house before, went wandering around. It was a huge house for only three people: three bedrooms he did not enter, a room for guests to sit, a vegetable garden, a kitchen and sink, a huge jasmine vine, two yards, one covered with grape vines, even an indoor bath with a tub, a separate pigpen, then chicken yards, a carob tree so big it made his tummy ache with envy, and of course a *fournò* out the back.

As he made his way back to Mihali he whistled at the *woofa*, taking up almost all of another room.



‘No wonder your family is rich,’ he said as Maria returned. ‘Your mother must make beautiful fabric with that.’

‘My mother makes the best fabric in the world; no one’s is as good as hers. Now you go and sit in the *sala*, like I told you, and I will get the *glyko*.’

Strangely he did not reply and so she climbed on the chair and tiptoed up to get the jar of preserved cherries. This was one she had not ransacked recently and so she felt safe pulling it down, knowing she could spoon out enough for the three of them without her mother really noticing.

‘Thank you for the compliment daughter,’ her mother’s voice nearly made her fall off the chair. ‘Here, let me help you with that, you would hate to drop it, although you seem quite agile at pulling those jars down.’ Her mother carefully took the jar and put it on the bench.

‘We had visitors. I was just being polite. I was sick. They sent me home!’ Maria stuttered.

‘I heard,’ Dimitra replied pulling out two small glass plates, two tiny silver forks and poured water into her best glasses. She placed them on the tray and suddenly Mustafa stood up.

‘I am sorry, I should go,’ he was embarrassed by seeing only two plates and thought it best to leave.

‘Please I would be honoured if you stayed as my guest,’ she insisted and so he sat again. She served both boys as Maria stood watching. Mustafa could not help smirk when he realised why there really were only two plates.

‘You will not want any, having been sick child,’ she said. ‘I came home to check on you, my concern was...’

‘Much appreciated mamma, but how did you find out?’

‘It is a small village my girl, everyone knows everyone’s business.’

The boys sat eating the syrupy sweets. Somehow they could not really enjoy them, and were relieved once they swallowed the last mouthful. The water helped to unstick their throats a little and when he had finished Mustafa again stood.

‘*Efkaristo Kyria Dimitra*, but I had best get to my flute lesson with *Ahmedbey*,’ he declared.

‘You must indeed; it would be rude to keep him waiting. You must also take him a gift from me,’ Dimitra said and reached up for the walnut jar.

‘No!’ called out Maria. It was her favourite. Consequently there were only pieces on the outside of the jar left; she often helped herself to it.

Her mother raised her eyebrows and gave her daughter a questioning look.

‘He is allergic to walnuts,’ Maria blurted out.

‘Apricots?’ her mother asked understanding full well, carefully checking the seal of the jar she selected.

‘They are fine,’ Maria replied. She couldn’t reach that far up the back. How she wanted to go back to school.

As she handed the jar to Mustafa, Dimitra smiled sadly.

‘You are welcome here; the door is always open to you. You can come any time you are nearby. Give my best to both Ahmed and your mother.’

He bowed formally and smiled, but left in thoughtful silence. Mihali stood too.

‘I had better get back to school,’ he decided thinking it would be best not to witness Maria’s humiliation that was sure to come.

‘Me too,’ Maria chimed in; hoping against hope her mother would leave it until later to upbraid her.

‘You are going nowhere my little *pontike* and tomorrow I will buy a lock for that cupboard,’ she declared.

Well, I will find the key no matter where you hide it, the young girl planned.

Mihali had gotten up to leave but had not moved, torn between staying and going.

‘Goodbye Mihali, thank you for seeing my sick daughter safely home,’ her mother made it easy for them both. It was not her intent to upbraid the girl in public.

‘Thank you for the *glyko*, it was delicious,’ he said and left as quickly as he could.

Maria stood looking at her mother, who stared silently back at her. She would have loved to have a few of the sweet preserved cherries to get rid of the bitterness in her mouth.

‘You only have to ask if you want something,’ Dimitra said. ‘You will be told yes or no, but you will not steal again. Do you hear me? You almost embarrassed me in front of a guest. I will not stand for that; imagine how insulted Ahmed would have been to get half a jar of sweets from me. A man who has no wife to cook for him.’ Her mother leant and looked severely at the child who was suddenly busy examining the hem of her dress.

‘Are you okay? Why were you sick?’

Maria looked up. She wished she were back at the school garden watering her plants, checking on her spinach, so that nothing was eating the leaves that shouldn’t be.

‘I hate that milk, and that syrup ... it makes me ill. I told them, no one listened.’

‘If you promise me not to thief again I will walk you to school and make sure you never have to drink it again. But I want your word. You will never take what does not belong to you.’

‘I promise,’ Maria said, still standing awkwardly. ‘Mamma, ah, I may have ruined the teacher’s skirt, and it is foreign,’ she admitted.

‘I will make her another one that is not,’ her mother said proudly, and Maria hoped one day she could say the same and fix a problem as easily.

‘Sit down child!’

Her mother turned her back to her and took out another two glass dishes from the *vitrina*. She poured water and took out two more filigree spoons and then she offered the child *glyko* with a small smile on her face. In her day, she had bribed her brothers by taking out three pieces when her own mother was not looking, giving them one to share so they were complicit in her crime, and then eating the other two herself.

‘*Efkaristo Mamma*,’ Maria sat taking small bites not only so the *glyko* would last, but also because this was a side of her mother she rarely saw. As she chewed she asked, ‘Will you teach how me to sew a dress?’ It was what she wanted to know the most. It would give her the freedom to look after herself.

‘There are a few stages before sewing a dress you may have to master,’ her mother said enjoying the forbidden sweets. Dimitra tended to roundness; all her people were full bodied. She had seen her daughter turn her hand to the jasmine necklaces, her fingers were agile and her sense of proportion exact. ‘Mending, first we start with mending and buttons. But only if you will stop stealing sweets?’

The child thought about it. She could not give them up entirely, best to make a bargain. ‘Will you let me eat them sometimes if I ask?’

‘Yes, I told you that already.’

‘You don’t need a lock then,’ Maria agreed and the scolding was done.

‘Shall we take you back to school? If we walk slowly you will get there just in time for gardening.’

Maria nodded, happy with the compromise. Together they walked towards the mill and found Mihali sitting waiting for her.

‘I thought you may come along,’ he said smiling widely.

‘Come on you two, I need to get back to the *halloumi*,’ and she took both their hands as they walked past Ahmed’s house. Seeing them he waved, and played them a tune to walk by, as succulent as the apricots he had been sent.

‘Why did you send Ahmed sweets?’ Maria asked.

‘He has been our neighbour child, for decades. It is what neighbours do.’

The hill was as slippery to climb as it was in the morning.

‘Why did you tell Mustafa he could come again?’ the girl was curious.

‘Why do you ask so many questions?’ Her mother was cautious.

‘Because I’m not stupid,’ Maria declared.

Dimitra stopped in her tracks and leant down to the child.

‘Whoever suggested you were child?’

‘The teacher says it to me all the time.’

Her mother suddenly found the will to get up the hill. Did things never change?

(\*‘Stolen Sweets — 1964’ is an excerpt from the novel that the author is writing in fulfilment of her PhD, currently entitled, ‘No Man’s Land’).